

OF AGENCY AND ABSTRACTION

For his contribution to the Whitney Biennial, sculptor **Matthew Angelo Harrison** offers a subtly potent take on globalization and the complexities of black American culture. The Detroit-based artist is now going global himself, with work on view in Paris later this year and a solo show at the Kunsthalle Basel in 2020.

BY COCO ROMACK
PORTRAIT BY TYLER JONES



Installation view of Harrison's 2018 exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery, "Prototype of Dark Silhouettes."



ON A RECENT AFTERNOON, THE DETROIT-BASED SCULPTOR

Matthew Angelo Harrison acts as a guide through the 2019 Whitney Biennial, pointing out his favorite pieces. He is one of 75 artists included in the untitled survey, and at 29, joins three-quarters of the roster aged under 40, making this iteration the museum's youngest to date. Among his top picks are Tiona Nekkia McClodden's assemblage of ritualistic tools carved from a tree she cut, accompanied by a video documenting their production; a black-and-white photograph by Elle Pérez centering a couple in embrace, one of whose chest is wrapped in plastic and bears the markings of needle play (body piercing performed for the pleasure of the sensation); and a pair of

fragmented still-life portraits by Paul Mpagi Sepuya created in collaboration with the writer Ariel Goldberg. Illuminating the walls of a room on the museum's fifth floor, Sepuya's photographs—for which he employs mirrors, tripods, and the presence of the camera itself to interrogate the relationship between artist, tool, and composition—surround and complement Harrison's own hybrid creations. For his contribution, Harrison presents six new sculptures in his *Dark Silhouettes* series. Each features an artifact submerged in resin, then precisely cut by a CNC router into rectangular totems of varying sizes and imprinted with mechanical forms marking the

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caress of the machine. Four Dogon spears and two wooden idols from West Africa—some bona fide antiques and others mass produced for sale in the West—appear obscured within, as if frozen in ice, an effect intentionally achieved by Harrison to communicate an idea he calls "abstract ancestry." They sit atop sleek metal pedestals fashioned after mid-century Belgian designs, alluding to the country's history of colonization in Africa.

"In order to relate and assimilate into where black Americans are culturally, they've had to reappropriate African imagery to create their own idea of what homeland is," he says. Approaching his craft like a techno producer (a symptom of his Michigan upbringing), Harrison notes that the provenance of the objects, like a sample within a track, is less important than the finished product. Once these objects reach his hands, they've lost their cosmic energy. "I've reassembled the story of these things and embedded them within my own narrative as a black person who's been completely removed from his ancestry."

At the center of the room one piece stands out. Titled *Worker Fragment Gleam* (2019), it consists of a floating severed BMW headlight at first glance and appears like a specimen in a bell jar. Harrison, a former Ford employee, notes that the car was assembled in

a Detroit factory: "You think of this as a European car when, in fact, it's driven here, assembled here, and consumed here," he says. When viewed together, the installation operates as a powerful visual metaphor for the loss and reassembling of culture as a result of globalization, and the exchange between production and human life. With a subdued palette of browns and grays, the statement feels tempered, even matter-of-fact.

"All these pass-throughs that happen because of globalization leave a trace. It takes something away from the identity of each thing," he says. "Once the anger's gone, how do we actually adapt to these seismic shifts in culture and make them, not necessarily right, but functional in a way that is helpful for everyone to understand history? It's a rehab process."

Though some critics of this year's Biennial argue that the exhibition lacks the radical fire with which it has become synonymous over the course of its 79-year history, many of the artists have successfully carved out space for subtle work, art that seethes rather than shouts. With a potent but heady allusion for the complexities of contemporary black American culture, forever altered by the tides of colonialism and globalization, Harrison makes the case for agency over outrage.